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ABSTRACT

An unconventional writing activity like correspondence between students can, under favorable social circumstances, encourage some college composition students to discover and employ literate, or decontextualized, writing strategies. The African American student will often write, to borrow James Britton's terms, from the standpoint of the "participant" rather than the "spectator"; that is, he or she will write in an immediate, choppy style, without due regard for the reader, rather than in a more complex syntactical structure intended to make reading easier for his or her reader. A study of 12 college writers at a historically Black college exchanging letters with high school students of the same race and socio-economic background showed that students moved naturally from the participant stance to the spectator stance under the right conditions. The participants in the study broke down into basically two groups: those who experimented with the social roles they adopted in their letter writing and those who did not. The former group moved gradually toward the spectator stance regardless of the quality of their relationship with their correspondent. The latter group, however, moved toward the spectator stance only to the extent that their relationship with their correspondent remained positive. A case study of one student suggests further that for at least some students experimentation with social roles helps them move toward the spectator stance. (Contains two tables, two graphs, and copies of student letters.) (TB)

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ED 374 418

Tone and Role: From 'Participant' Stance to the 'Spectator' Stance in the Writing of African American College Composition Students

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As teachers of African-American students, we were often impressed by our students' cogent and lively classroom conversations on current events or reading selections. But we weres often left frustrated when we attempted to use traditional writing activities. Conventional essay assignments seemed to cause the vivid expression and strong personal convictions of the group discussions to evaporate. We continually felt that our students were capable of better writing than they were doing. Since college writers need to develop considerable control over the written idiom in order to meet the demands of academic discourse, student writers from predominantly oral cultures, like African-Americans, may need special opportunities to develop familiarity with the literate register. Sensing our students' real ability, and real enjoyment of language, we began to look for ways to reduce their inhibitions about writing, for ways to narrow the gap between oral and written performance.

The following discussion is based on a syntactical and tonal analysis of personal letters written by twelve of our college composition students at an historically Black college. These students corresponded weekly with culturally similar high school students at an inner city public high school in a large urban area. We reasoned that since our writing students and their high-school pen pals were unknown to each other and separated from each other in time and space, they could not employ tone of voice, gesture, or body language to convey their meaning. Each pair of correspondents was therefore forced to build up a world of shared knowledge through the written word alone.

We shall argue that an unconventional writing activity like correspondence between students can, under favorable social circumstances, encourage some college compostion students to discover and employ literate, or decontextualized, writing strategies to a larger extent than at the start of the correspondence. Further, we will show that this shift, when it does occur, may follow from an extended process of tonal experimentation on the part of corresponding students. Although initially we employ a quantitative approach, in a later section we will focus on the correspondence of one of our students. The analysis of individual letters appears key to understanding what stimuli lay behind the rising or dropping numbers of literate strategies in an individual correspondence.

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Why Write Letters?

Experience with our students' oral ability led us to consider whether cultural differences may inhibit students from acquiring academic discourse conventions as these are defined by the mainstream culture. Study of these characteristics includes attention to the importance of vivid oral communications (Linn 144), and to the emphasis placed on interpersonal relations and group identity in the African-American community (Cooper 202). Because academic writing requires "topic-centered" rather than "topic-associating" writing (Michaels 427, 429), literate rather than oral strategies (Chafe), and a stance detached from and even critical of the subject and/or the audience, African-American students may find themselves torn between the cultural and linguistic values of school and those of the home tradition. Since transitional writing activities are often recommended to help inexperienced writers build upon their oral ability and their social motivation (Collins and Williamson 34; Farr and Daniels 59; Nystrand 20), we thought correspondence might function as just such a transitional activity. It might encourage our students to experiment with the literate register in a more familiar context.

As ethnographers point out, collaborative tendencies result when individuals are, like our students, culturally predisposed to "prefer psychological... closeness to their group" (Cooper 202). The collaborative aspect of correspondence might then mean such an activity would evoke our students' real writing ability. Such collaborative tendencies include, for example, the interactive nature of the call-and-response tradition used by Black speakers (Miller and Vander Lei 55), or, as Erickson points out, the use many Black conversationalists make of repetition to reaffirm the social harmony of the group (Herskovits and Abrahams qtd. in Erickson 86). The collaboration required in letter writing might mean that our students would, in the letters, use their social abilities to move toward more literate writing values.

Furthermore, correspondence with younger Black students would make our students natural mentors; they would be able to speak as authorities to less knowledgeable readers. This tendency would be fostered by our students' inclination to be socially inclusive rather than exclusive. Dr. Grace Cooper of Howard University points out that Black students are "holistic" thinkers, and the "holistic thinker does not separate from the group" (202). Thus vital relationships can develop between correspondents of different ages. These relationships are not unlike the "play brother," "play sister," "play mother," or "play father" relationships which appear to be fairly common in the Black community since they are mentioned in letters written both by college and high school students. Some of our students may have viewed the pen-pal relationship as an opportunity to develop just such a "play" relationship as those described in their letters. The mentoring role may have seemed very

natural, since they could view it in such a culturally familiar way.

Orality and Literacy, "Participant" Stance and "Spectator" Stance

Since letterwriting may help students by supplying a highly specific social context in which the writing will take place, what are the terms needed for discussing the writer's relationship with this social context? While "role" describes the particular relationship the writer is defining for himself vis-a-vis the reader, we will use "stance" to refer to the writer's attitude toward both his subject and his audience.

One significant and also quantifiable way of distinguishing between the stances related to "oral" and "literate" writing is through syntax. Simple syntax (parataxis) is equated with orality, and complex syntax (hypotaxis) with the written or literate style. And, newly applying James Britton's terms "participant" and "spectator," (79-81), Seitz and the Summerfields also label writing marked by oral syntactic features as writing from the stance of the "participant," and writing marked by literate syntactic features as writing from the stance of the "spectator."

The "participant" stance in writing is marked by a loose and choppy style (Summerfields *Frames* 143) and by a feeling of "immediacy" (Seitz 823). The writer's stance is that of a participant in the experience he reports, and he tends to neglect the needs of the reader (Summerfields *Texts* 171). Writing from the "spectator" stance, on the other hand, means using complex syntactic structures to express more precisely the relationships between ideas; the writer as spectator is somewhat "removed" (*Frames* 156) from the situation about which he writes. He creates meaning which is "explicit" and less "abbreviated" (Collins 208, 210; Collins and Williamson), and he balances his concern for the subject with his awareness of the reader's needs (Summerfields *Texts* 171). While the genre of the familiar letter certainly entails the use of both kinds of writing, it is clear that students who increase their use of "spectator"-stance features are moving toward literate writing values.

By counting oral and literate syntactic features in our students' letters, we hoped to discover whether they have increased their use of literate, or "spectator"-stance, syntactic features. How often have they chosen the "thoughtful" (Brooks and Warren 280), "detached" stance normally associated with concern for the reader's needs and with literate prose (Chafe "Integration and Involvement" 45)?

These definitions underlie our quantitative analysis of the letters. We will also consider, in a case study, such non-quantifiable spectator features as the "evaluation" of reported experience, the concern for"public" and "social" issues, and the development of "past-

future" connections (Summerfields Texts 230-1).

Principles of Analysis

Please see Table 1 for examples of oral and literate syntactic features counted.

Results

The twelve college writers tended to fall into two groups. A key difference between the two groups is the absence (Group I - the non-experimenters) or presence (Group II - the experimenters) of role-play involving shifts in status: the experimenters (Group II) often adjusted their rapport with their pen pals by alternating between a superior and a subordinate role vis-a-vis the high school pen pal. Student experimentation with stance included their assumption of a variety of roles belonging to the older members of a family: mothers, fathers, and grandmothers. The students taking roles of ministers or other community leaders can be identified readily through the verbatim inclusion of liturgical formulae, as well as by the use of a phrase like "my black children" in which the writer is imagining himself metaphorically as the parent of all young people in a congregation or community. Surprising juxtapositions of conflicting roles frequently occur in the letters, but these indicate that these roles are temporary, and that the student is experimenting. Thus, the "woman wronged" is one moment in a passionate rage, the next simply a peer complaining of dental difficulties.

Our analysis of the non-experimenters (Group I) (those who did not experiment with stance) showed that whether or not these writers had positive relationships with their pen pals, they rose considerably in their use of spectator-stance strategies (see Table 2).These students increased the fomality of their writing, perhaps in order to make a good social impression. This rise usually dissipated during the last half of the semester, possibly because of complacence in the relationship or loss of interest. The unchanging rapport that the non-experimenters (Group I) maintained with their pen pals seemed to reduce the possibilities for tonal experimentation. If, for example, a college writer always cast herself as a responsible big sister in relation to her younger pen pal, she could not allow herself a more casual or gossipy tone.

However, the experimenters (Group II), those who varied their stance, were much more affected by whether the pen-pal relationship was positive or negative. If they had positive feelings about their pen pals, they tended to increase in their use of spectator-stance syntactic features, and this increase continued to the conclusion of the correspondence.

Three of the writers in this group were able to continue to improve their writing straight to the end of the correspondence, perhaps because their role-playing halped them to stay interested in their reader's reactions. Because of their positive relationships, these students saw more possiblity in the activity.

The other experimenters experienced negative feelings toward their pen pals. Though in the initial stages they experimented with roles, they tended to move steadily downward towards a concentration of participant-stance syntactic features. They seemed to decline almost from the beginning. This is not to say, however that these writers did not benefit at all. Emotional growth and exposure to new people and situations can take place even if a writer is not yet able to improve his writing by increasing spectator-stance strategies. Ultimately, eight of the twelve writing students in the college group realized writing gains for at least a considerable portion of the semester.

From 'Participant" Stance to 'Spectator' Stance: A Case Study

One of our experimenters, a college freshman named Kenya, considerably increased the frequency of spectator-stance syntactic strategies over the period of her correspondence with her twelfth-grade pen pal, Paul. What kind of social experience would produce a situation in which Kenya would want to use spectator-stance sentence features? One salient characteristic of Kenya's and Paul's correspondence (ten letters, ten responses) was the remarkable degree of synchrony in the roles they played.

While we may expect that successful letter exchanges would involve a pleasant sharing of news and opinions, this correspondence may best be described as a formally choreographed dance involving social poses instead of dance steps. The two students take turns complementing each other's poses, or mirroring them. The significance of this patterning is suggested by the considerable degree of symmetry involved: the two correspondents appear to move twice through nearly the same complete dance figure (to continue the metaphor), each figure requiring five letters and their responses to complete. The individual dance steps within each figure consist of three different roles or poses. Each correspondent assumes and relinquishes these roles in order, moving successively toward more authoritative, worldly poses. If the cooperation needed for such a degree of symmetry seems difficult to accept, I refer you to Perry Gilmore's study of Black children's out-of-school literacy games. Gilmore describes the remarkable degree of self-government and organization shown by groups of Black children as they play intricate games like "doin' steps" or Dungeons and Dragons, games which tax already highly developed, though non-academic literacy skills.

In the first exchange of letters, both Kenya and Paul write in the voice of peers; neither

assumes the mentoring role. But in her second letter (2/7), Kenya's voice is that of an advice-giver. Assuming a somewhat more superior tone than before, she advises on school and on social life. Paul bows to the advice, asking her opinion on his girlfriends, and he thus casts her in the mentoring role which she has already chosen for herself. Since he has offered the complementary stance and acted the willing student, endorsing her claims to superior knowledge by doing so, Kenya continues in this role through 2/14. But her pen pal now urges her to share her thoughts - it is his turn to play the mentor. She obliges, becoming the willing subordinate in search of the mentoring Paul now offers in his response to her letter of 2/21. He in turn is thanked, and Kenya, in 2/28, introduces a new step into the dance, a new pose, the most worldly and adult attempted yet: for a brief moment she adopts the role of minister or community leader who reflects in broad terms on the destiny of the community. In his response, Paul echoes or mirrors this language with some clerical-sounding abstractions of his own. And here the "figure" is complete, and the same pattern is begun all over, starting with Kenya's letter of 3/6. Only Paul's expected echoing of Kenya's again brief "community elder" role is absent from the second figure.

This high degree of interaction between the two seems to foster Kenya's continued experimentation with roles (see Table 3). In the first figure, Kenya attempts the grown-up roles which entail the use of spectator-stance features, but she cannot always make them seem authentic or sustain them for long. Consequently, her percentages drop below the high point established in the second letter, though they never drop as low as her first letter. Paul's supportive echoing of her grown-up roles, his endorsement of her poses, probably helps her to grow into them so that she can sustain them longer and do so with greater authenticity in the second half of their correspondence (the second figure, 3/6 - 4/20). By alternating these roles, Paul shows Kenya that the concern and sense of responsibility for others implied by the big sister or community elder role matter to him, too.

Each partner must "bow" to, or accept the temporarily superior role adopted by the other; the moves complement one another. There can be, after all, no true mentoring without a respectful beneficiary to endorse the authority assumed by the mentor. Similarly, neither correspondent can adopt the worldly voice of the community elder until he/she is assured that less presumptuous roles have seemed socially viable to the pen pal. By a succession of increasingly adult poses, the two correspondents seem gradually to accumulate a fund of collaboratively approved mature voices. The more pretentious role of the community elder is mirrored or echoed in the first figure by Paul rather than complemented, perhaps to show his sympathy and interest, or perhaps to remind Kenya of exactly how much this very grown-up role assumes.

Of course, these are still poses. This is revealed by unconscious self-contradiction, as

for example in Kenya's letter of 2/14, in which she regrets her own decision to commit to one boyfriend, even as she insists that loyalty is what she wants and what she advises for Paul. But the important issue does not seem to be how perfect a fit the adult role is; when Paul takes her grown-up pose seriously, he signals at least a partial advance in maturity for Kenya. Indeed, Kenya's final letter is both personally and stylistically more mature than almost anything that has preceded. The voice in this letter is both more authentically grown-up and less authoritative than any of her earlier grown-up poses.

But role play alone does not explain Kenya's increased use of literate sentence strategies. As she moved from one role to another, from peer, to mentor, to community elder, she also varied a more general kind of attitude: her stance. When she wrote as a peer, she wrote from the stance of the participant; she wrote a breathless, primer-style syntax, and ignored her audience's needs in favor of a total absorption in her subject. The material was always private and specific in nature, and she showed little distance from her subject matter (Summerfield and Summerfield *Texts* 231). But when she wrote as a mentor, she provided more complex sentence structure (Summerfield and Summerfield *Texts* 287); then she explained the relationships between her ideas. As the Summerfields point out, such writing is consistent with the expression of ideas which have "public resonance" (Texts 231). Then her detachment from her subject meant she was able to show greater awareness of her reader's needs. This stance was consistent with the role of the mentor or the community elder.

Generally, the mentoring, or "big sister" role, and the community elder role tended to draw from her the sentence features related to the spectator stance. As "big sister," Kenya was more likely to reflect on her own high school memories and relate them to Paul's possible future experience. This use of past and future tense (Summerfield and Summerfield *Texts* 231), as well as the tendency to "contextualize" by providing background information to help Paul understand her advice, are typical of the more detached spectator stance (287). Similarly, Kenya, when speaking in the role of the big sister, tended to "evaluate" her ideas and her experience to guide Paul's choices (230). The reflective detachment of mentoring led to the increased use of hypotactic sentence structure; mentoring brought into being higher levels of spectator-stance syntactic strategies.

In Kenya's first letter, however, the lowest scoring in terms of spectator-stance syntactic strategies, she shows her initial use of the peer voice and participant- stance strategies. Her absorption in herself is obvious from the number of simple sentences beginning with "I." The breathless tone, and the feeling that the writer does not herself have any sense of what will come next are typical of the participant stance (Summerfield and Summerfield *Texts* 140). Further, the primer style often leaves gaps between ideas, creating the fragmented, incoherent feel typical of speech. Her more oral syntactic strategies with their repetitive and

disjointed character suggest that, had this been an actual conversation, much meaning would have been supplied by facial expression, gesture, and tone of voice. As it is, meaning is highly abridged, and the reader is unaided in detecting relationships between individual syntactic units.

However, by the ninth letter (4/10), Paul's responsiveness has shown her that he values her comments. Her pride in him as a potentially successful Black male and her consciousness of her greater experience make the mentoring role natural. In the course of giving advice, she develops past-future connections typical of the spectator stance (Summerfield and Summerfield *Texts* 171, 231): "I tried to help you so you won't become another young brother lost..." Still writing from the stance of the spectator, she "evaluates" specific kinds of social behavior to help Paul realize potential pitfalls (126-7, 134, 167, 231): "Stay away from the guys who are not trying to help themselves..."

As she stands back from her own experience, recalling her past and relating it to Paul's future, spectator-stance sentence features seem natural also. Subordinating syntactic structures are another way for Kenya to provide fuller context, background, for her ideas: "As a true friend and hopefully a mentor, I'm asking you to keep praying..." She subordinates her mission and her role, using the main clause structure to emphasize the advice she wants Paul to follow. Because she wants her advice to be effective, she discovers and employs syntactic strategies which scarcely appeared in her first letter at all. Her concern with wanting to be understood by Paul is now balanced with her concern for her subject; now she writes convincingly from the stance of the spectator.

The mentoring role seems to encourage the detachment needed for spectator-stance discourse. But sometimes Kenya rises for a moment above the personal to achieve something of what the Summerfields call "public resonance" (*Texts* 231). When she tells Paul,"...I feel that we are obligated to one another to help each other as Black people," she is no longer the mentor advising him alone. Here she offers a reflection from the stance of a more "impersonal" spectator (275). She is on the verge of imagining a more generalized kind of reader, one with fewer known personal characteristics, in short, the kind of reader one needs to imagine to write effective academic discourse. Her newly acquired consciousness of Paul's needs as a reader has led her to the threshold of a new challenge: writing about impersonal issues to a reader who is not personally known to the writer.

Table 1

Principles of Analysis

Oral Syntactic Features (Participant Stance)

1. Coordinating conjunctions at the beginning of a clause
   Example: So did you have fun on your Birthday?

2. Sentence fragment
   Example: Because finals I know I got to have A and B's.

3. "I" followed by verb, or "I" followed by verb + modifier and/or prepositional phrase. These clauses may follow each other with other or without a coordinating conjunction between them.
   Example: I'm 20 years old, I'm a Saggitarius. I'm the oldest of five children.

4. Incoherent sentences (sentences without paragraph indention, and without "parallel," "sequential," or "extended parallel progression.")*
   Example: Why did you have three surgeries? Are your parents divorced? I don't mean to be so personal, but I'm a very curious person.

Literate Syntactic Features (Spectator Stance)

1. Nominalizations (gerunds)
   Example:I truly like writing you.

2. Prepositional phrases
   Example: From what you have told me you like to party all of the time and go.

3. Sequence of prepositional phrases
   Example: At this point in my life achievement is my main focus.

4. Attributive adjectives
   Example: I chose this because I have a wonderful speaking ability.

5. Conjoined phrases (two elements of more than one word each joined by a conjunction)
   Example: It will teach me more about responsibility and how to care for people.

6. Series (three elements in parallel order)
   Example: As I look back into my freshman year of high school, I see myself one being (sic) very friendly, outgoing, and fashionable person.

7. Infinitive phrases
   Example:I chose to go or come to Morris Brown because I wanted to get away from home and I decided that I wanted to go to a black college.

8. Relative clauses (including complement, or noun clauses, and contact clauses)
   Example: Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you that last year I use to drive, but I kinda hit a mailbox and I am out of a car.

9. Participles (modifiers)
   Example: My desire to continue my education will be very rewarding once I get out into the real world.

10. Passives
    Example: When you become a senior you will most surely be crown Miss Caver High.

11. Dependent clauses introduced by subordinating conjunctions
    Example: I like when we exchange letters you are a cool person.

*The following are examples of coherence patterns from Connor and Farmer (131):

Parallel Progression:

(1) Chocolates are a national craving. (2) Records show that they are sold in huge quantities - 11.2 pounds per capita per year. (3) Designer chocolates often sell for nearly $30/lb. (4) It is obvious that these candies are America's number one choice.
Sequential Progression:

(1) I saw a strange man in the street. (2) He was wearing a large badge. (3) The badge was multicolored and gaudy.

Extended Parallel Progression:

(1) Body language varies from culture to culture. (2) To say yes, Americans nod their heads up and down. (3) Japanese and Italians use the same nod to say no. (4) Body language is an important skill for international managers.

The following is an example of an incoherent passage, also from Connor and Farmer (131):

(1) School is boring. (2) Many of my friends have motor cycles. (3) As you all know, most teenagers have part-time jobs.

Table 2
Percentages of Spectator-Stance Syntactic Features

Group I (Non-Experimenters)

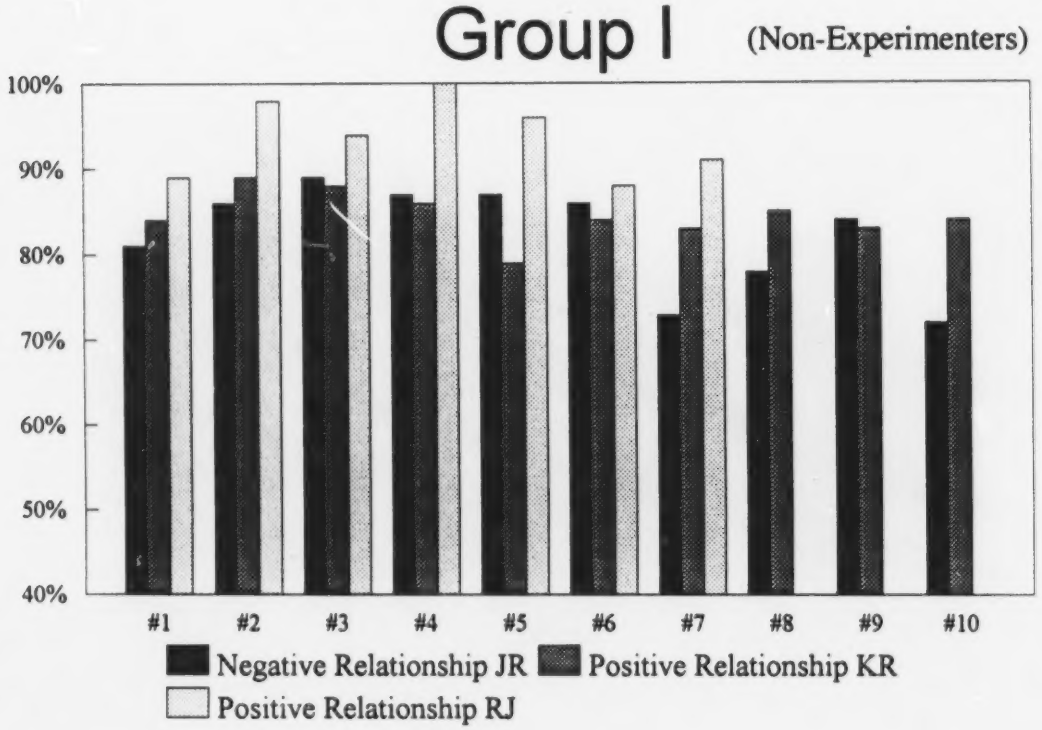
	Character of Relationship	First	Middle	Penultimate	Last Letter
JW	Neg	93%	98%	91%	85%
RJ	Pos	89%	100%	88%	91%
WS	Pos	88%	100%	92%	91%
KR	Pos	84%	84%	83%	84%
JR	Neg	81%	87%	84%	72%

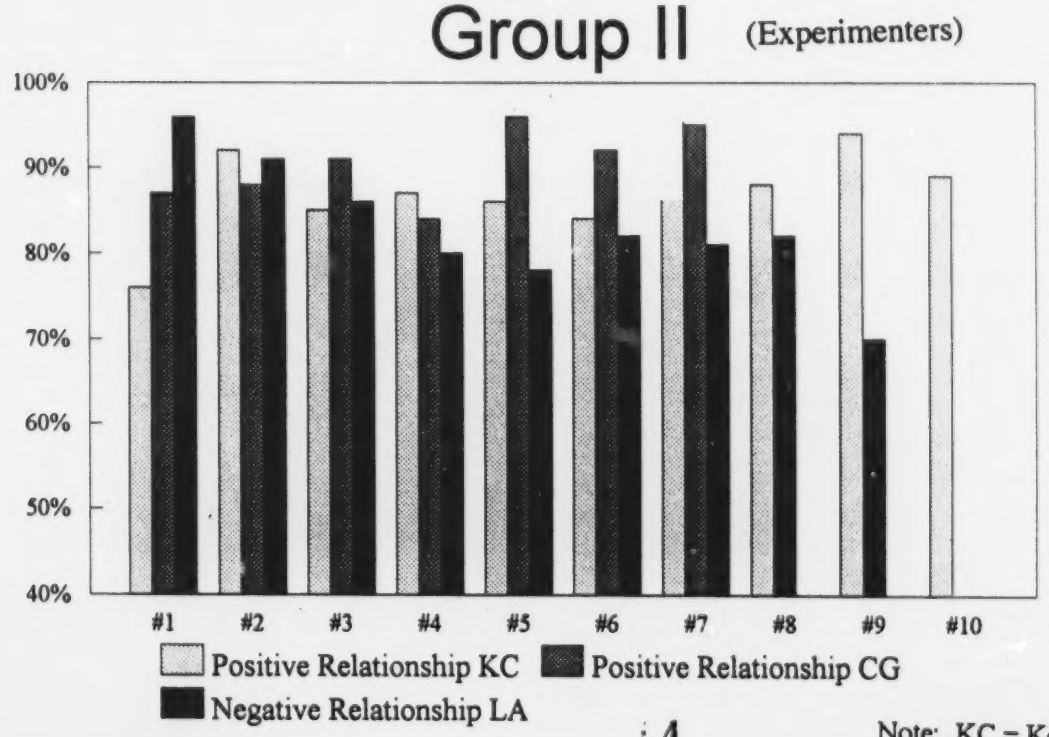
Group II (Experimenters)

Kenya C	Pos	76%	84%	94%	89%
CG	Pos	87%	84%	92%	95%
AG	Pos	89%	90%	95%	93%
GB	Pos	94%	93%	92%	91%
SM	Neg	95%	88%	88%	82%
TR	Neg	90%	87%	83%	80%
LA	Neg	96%	78%	82%	70%

Table 3

Percentage of Spectator-stance (literate) Syntactic Features in Letters From Group I And Group II Writers





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Note: KC = Kenya C

Excerpts From Kenya's and Paul's Correspondence

from Kenya's letter of 1/31:

Hi my name is Kenya C. and I'm a 2nd Semester Freshman at Morris Brown College. I'm from Los Angeles, California. I've been here a year now. I'm 20 years old, I'm a Saggitarius. I'm the oldest of 5 children. My parents and siblings moved here to live. I'm 5'3, medium built, very friendly, but I have a mean look. I'm fun & crazy! Really I am! My major is Early Childhood Education, my minor is Psychology. I plan on getting a Ph.D. and an Ed. in Grad school. I enjoy children very much. My hobbies include crafts, roller skating, dancing, street dance & modern dance. I've been dancing since my early childhood days. I like to write stories...

I love music!!! I like all kinds even some low key soft pop & rock. But my kind of music is Rap, R&B, Gospel and Reggae. I also like Hip-Hop & House Music. My favorite Rap artist are Public Enemy, ice Cube (sic), and Naughty by Nature. There are a lot more. I don't hang out much. I have many associates (too many!)...

from Paul's response to 1/31:

I know this is kind of boring. But it hard to talk about myself when I don't know what you want to hear. I also enjoy music. I'm sorry my letter is so short and dull but I just learned I was to write you today. I promise my future letters will be more interesting.

from Kenya's letter of 2/7:

Have you decided what you wanted to major in if you go to college? Well here's advice. Not to say college is a bad choice, but if you have to go, go, if not don't go! Do you know what I'm saying? I mean, look in the future, the job market. Major in technology (engineering) or go into the medical field. You will always have a job. College is very expensive and if don't get scholarships or grants, its going to be hectic. I have two major loans and they <u>have to</u> be repaid as soon as I graduate.

from Paul's response to 2/7:

Hello again. I want to thank you for your advice. I can tell you a very caring person. I know how hard college can be. I have a sister at Fort Valley State College. She is always telling me that you will get out of college what you put into it...

Well let me move on. There is a little situation I'm in, that I hope you can help me with. I have always been a sensative and caring about people especially the black woman. This is because I grew up around my mother and two sisters. My father was always on the road or something. From the time I can remember, I have dreamed of having the perfect relationship. I have not had many girlfriend, but the ones I had were treated with royalty. We all broke-up for one reason or another.

Now they all want to come back. Along with them I seem to meet new women averyday. Eventhough I believe I am on the way toward making big money and achieving my dreams, I don't believe I will be worth it unless I have a beautiful <u>black</u> not white <u>woman</u> (single not plural) to share my life with.

Now my question to you is should I give all of these ladies another chance, or should I start training to play ball in college and forget about all of them...

from Kenya's letter of 2/14:

I suggest to you, that you get in school and start yourself off right! You don't need a female now. I know it's tough and all, but believe me! Wait til you go to college...Even now sometimes I wish I were single cuz (because) (sic) there are so many others I want to meet. Yes I do want a steady relationship, an everlasting relationship with my now boyfriend but you are young and you have a promising future. Sometimes females can get you off the track...

from Paul's response to 2/14:

Thank you for your concern and advice. I guess you could tell from my last letter that I was leaning towards just trying to go to school...

My teacher is almost as bad as your when it comes to time but I hope I can write you more later. By the way, lets talk about what's on your mind.

Paul

from Kenya's letter of 2/21

OK, you said let's see what's on my mind? Well there is alot so I won't bore you with my problems. But this one particular problem with my boyfriend is driving me crazy. Bare with me because it's strange opening up to someone I just met. But this is where trust comes in so here is goes. You may think all couples especially in college have sex. Right? Well my boyfriend is sexually active and I'm not! I know it sounds funny but I have reasons, good reasons why I'm not sexually active. First of all, I follow the Bible and I try to do what's correct. I'm not saying that people who have sex are sinners or nothing like that, I'm just saying that it's not for me now. My boyfriend has a hard time dealing with that. He says he'll never hurt me or leave me which I believe him, but I'm just down-right scared! I'm not going to be like this always but I just need more time. You know? Do you think I should let him go and do that single life? I think a relationship can be strong and longlasting without sex. I really don't have time for xtra (sic) pressure on my mind. I hope this problem wasn't too much to handle. I'm just telling you what's on my mind. The truth. Please write me back and be as honest as possible. You have a good, strong mind and I'm sure you'll help me to see the light!

from Paul's response to 2/21:

First of all before I say anything else I would like to commend you for being your own woman and not just becoming sexually active because everyone else is said to be "doing it". This shows you have your own thoughts and ideas.

Moving on to the situation at hand. I'm going to try to simplify the problem. You are in a relationship. He should respect your thoughts and feelings as much as you respect his. It's your body. You don't have to do anything with it that you do want to. God gave it to you and you only. Your boyfriend should respect that. If he cares for you as much as he says, he would love and respect you regardless.

There is so much more to a true relationship than sex. Just to see a person you really care about produces a feeling (a kind of natural high) that makes your body tingle. Just being in the arms of a person you love provides a blanket of security that no form of hurt, harm, or danger can penetrate. I'm sure you have experienced this before.

There are so many other avenues, streets, and roads of a relationship, that are more scenic, beautiful, and enjoyable than the highway of sex many people are on. I'm saying sex is a way to obtain pleasure. But there are other way, many other ways. In fact if you take these avenues, streets, and roads you will find they are more fulfilling and rewarding in the long term.

from Kenya's letter of 2/28:

Hi! How are you? I'm doing pretty good. Thank you very much for your advise. I understand exactly what you mean. It's nice to hear something like that from a male. I can talk to my female pals but sometimes it makes more sense coming from a guy...

Forgive me if I sound as if guys are not supposed to be smart, but I am so glad that we have a lot more young gifted, black males out here. I feel so good when I see productive black males out here in this mean world. I have three young brothers and I worry about them everyday! All I do is pray that all young black boys get a chance in life. It nearly kills me to see black boys getting in trouble with the law or dead over stupid stuff. I want to try to make a difference in our community. That is why I'm going to become a Big Sister. It's my time to stop talking start producing. Talk is cheap so that's why I'm going to get out and do something. I hope I can help a child. Don't think I'm a racist but I'm more concerned with my black children than any other children in the world. I love all children but our kids need the most! But it all starts with the parents...

from Paul's response to 2/28:

I'm extremely proud to see a sister that is interest in the future of our people. You are

our future. Within you God as place the ability to give birth and raise a nation. Regardless to the extent of a man's education, his first teacher is always his mother. But that subject could fill a whole letter so I will go on...

from Kenya's letter 4/10:

For the past four months our friendship has developed into a special friendship. I hope I have helped you in some way. I know you have helped me in a lot of ways. I tried to help you so you wont become another young brother lost in this cruel world. Besides it's my obligation to guide you through. Matter of fact I feel that we are obligated to one another to help each other as Black people..I'm going to try my best to come to your Graduation. It will touch my heart to see a black gifted young man like yourself walk across the stage. My cousin is graduating also. He'll be the first male to graduate on my mother's side...Stay away from the guys who are not trying to help themselves better their lives. They don't have to be in college, but hang with those who are productive so they uplift you. I'm very serious Paul! I'll be watching!